

‘An understanding of faith is critical to

The moderator of the Church of Scotland tells **Magnus Linklater** why he is impressed by Theresa May

You don't have to believe in God to be a good leader but it helps, according to the Right Rev Dr Russell Barr, the Church of Scotland's moderator, whose year of office ends next month. His views echo those of Theresa May, who used her Easter message to defend the right of Christians to speak out about their faith, following controversy about religion being downplayed at Christian festivals.

The prime minister insisted that the government will stand up for people who openly profess their faith and will counter those who seek to drive religion from public life.

Dr Barr agrees. "It is important we have an understanding of our roots, and in the UK these roots are in the Christian tradition; an understanding of the Christian festivals gives us a sense of where we've come from."

The moderator has met Mrs May several times and was impressed by the way her church background informed her views. As the daughter of an Anglo-Catholic vicar with a strong Christian faith, Mrs May saw

the Scottish churchman as a potential ally in tackling the issue of human trafficking.

When he suggested that the kirk, by involving its partner churches in Africa, could be of valuable assistance in identifying the traffickers, she immediately responded. "It helped that she has an active church background," Dr Barr says. "I was able to say: 'We have a reach which you cannot have, with partner churches in some of the source countries.' As you can imagine, her ears pricked up at that, and the next day I got emails from her civil service team asking me to get in touch."

He believes she was right to criticise those, such as supermarkets and other organisations, who downplay the Christian message by dropping references to Easter.

"I have yet to experience anyone from other religions who had the slightest qualms about celebrating Christian festivals," he says. "One of the men I've got to know particularly well is an imam in one of the Shia Muslim communities; he invited me to a Christmas lunch so that we could celebrate the birth of the Saviour and the birth of the Prophet. Whoever is suggesting that people of other faiths are in any way offended [by Christian festivals], it's just nonsense."

On leadership and faith, Dr Barr is less convinced by President Trump, who condemned Assad's chemical attack by saying that "no child of God" should have been a victim. Did that qualify him as a believer? "He

claimed in the presidential campaign to be a presbyterian," Dr Barr notes drily. "My colleagues in the presbyterian church in the US were quick to deny it."

So where does Nicola Sturgeon stand in the faith stakes? Dr Barr smiles and shakes his head. "The answer is she has no church connections," he says.

Not that he intends that as a criticism, it is just that he feels it leaves a gap. "Whatever the particular commitment of a leader, an understanding of faith is critical to their leadership," is the way he puts it. Which begs the question of how critical leadership is to the church.

The problem with the office of moderator is that he has just one year in which to make his mark and nothing in the kirk's democratic tradition encourages the idea of self-promotion. This Easter, while Dr Barr's opposite numbers in the Church of England or in Rome were sending out messages that were widely reported, he was not even in the pulpit. Instead, he sat with his wife, Margaret, in the congregation of his parish church in Cramond.

"Nobody wants the moderator on Sunday," he jokes. "It's great, I get to be a normal person again."

It does mean, however, that the church's message is occasionally muffled — and meanwhile, congregations continue to fall. The moderator concedes that in terms of hard numbers that may be true, but says that support for the church's



Dr Russell Barr believes that having a religious faith with tolerance, compassion

any leadership’

community work is increasing.

"There is no getting away from the fact that numbers are declining," he says. "But that doesn't mean to say that congregations are not lively and well. Paradoxically, my experience of the last year has been one of change and diversity. There has been a rapid decline in the number of people who are communicant members of the church, but its income has continued to rise. Is that because people are putting more in the offering plate? Or is it that people are involved in other ways?" He adds: "Folk may not be signed up as members of a congregation but they will still think of it as their church."

He believes in the kirk as a unifying force, and proclaims a close friendship with Leo Cushley, the Roman Catholic archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh. While the traditional wing of the kirk may disapprove of contacts with Rome and still stands out against issues such as gay marriage, he feels that those differences are steadily eroding.

"I suspect that in 50 years' time we will look back on conversations we are having about issues of sexuality and say 'what was that about?'"

"The church has always had divergences, but what I have is an understanding that we are able to live comfortably with difference. We see and believe as best we can, we hold our faith and understanding with a degree of tolerance and compassion and understanding. That is the way we should handle our differences."



The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh went to morning service at St George's Chapel, Windsor, yesterday with other members of the royal family, including Princess Beatrice and the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. Meanwhile, Theresa May and her husband, Philip, attended church in her Maidenhead constituency

Christianity in Scotland ‘in crisis’ as churchgoing drops by over 50%

Peter Swindon

The number of regular churchgoers in Scotland has fallen by 54 per cent in three decades, a survey of Scottish Christians has shown.

A record low of 390,000 people now go to services, down from 854,000 in 1984, when the first Scottish Church Census was carried out.

Statistics show that only 7 per cent of people in Scotland now attend Christian worship, and the fall in numbers since the last census in 2002 is the equivalent of losing ten churches a month.

The Scottish Church Census — which is backed by every Christian denomination — saw worshippers from Scotland's 3,689 congregations surveyed in spring last year. Similar studies were carried out in 1984, 1994 and 2002.

Last year's results, released publicly for the first time on Easter Sunday, show a dramatic decline described by some senior clergy as a "crisis" for Christianity in Scotland. A key finding

was that two-fifths (42 per cent) of Scottish churchgoers are aged 65 or over, suggesting there could be a sharper decline in numbers unless churches can attract a new generation.

Projections based on new data gathered by statisticians who carried out the survey for Scottish churches show that the figure attending services is likely to fall by a further 100,000 in the next eight years.

It is predicted that only one in 20 people in Scotland will go to church by 2025.

Dr Peter Brierley, the lead researcher, said: "The main reason for decline is the death of people who go to church. People are elderly and older people die. "Part of the problem is that the proportion of people in the church who are elderly is much greater than in the population of Scotland as a whole. So you have a great number of churchgoers dying."

"The rate of replacement is not as many. That's the basic reason for decline."

"It's not that people are moving away

from the faith, although I'm sure some are, but in general terms that is not the case."

"There are also quite a lot of invisible Christians who used to go to church, still believe in God, but they have moved house, perhaps to a rural area, and simply haven't found a church to go to."

About 40 per cent of members of Scotland's congregations completed questionnaires in May last year.

The total attendance on or around so-called "Census Sunday" on May 8 was 389,510 people.

However, the report stressed that "this is not the total number of Christians in Scotland — 2.9 million according to the 2011 Census."

Numbers attending church fell in all

but one of Scotland's 32 local authority areas between 2002 and 2016, with the report suggesting that Aberdeenshire bucked the trend by recording a 2 per cent rise because there is a steady stream of oil industry employees coming into the area from overseas.

The steepest decline in numbers was recorded in West Dunbartonshire and Dumfries and Galloway, both down 47 per cent, closely followed by Clackmannanshire and Stirling, both down 46 per cent.

Scotland's big cities also show a sharp decline in the number of churchgoers, with a fall of 26 per cent recorded in Glasgow, 20 per cent in Edinburgh, 33 per cent in Dundee and 19 per cent in Aberdeen between 2002 and 2016.

When asked whether the new figures indicated a crisis in Christianity in Scotland, Dr Brierley was definitive.

"Yes, absolutely," he said. "We are living in the 21st century and one of the features of the 21st century is that people's allegiance to particular faiths is no longer as strong as it used to be."

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‘The main reason for decline is the death of people who go to church’

Defiant Pope urges Christians to help refugees

Philip Willan Rome

The Pope used his Easter address to 60,000 worshippers in St Peter's Square to appeal to Christians to open their hearts to refugees forced to leave their homes "as a result of armed conflicts, terrorist attacks, famine and oppressive regimes".

Speaking from the central balcony of St Peter's Basilica, he deflected criticism from right-wing politicians such

as Marine Le Pen who denounced his "open-door policy for migrants".

Francis said that Christians should be brothers and sisters to refugees, sharing bread and hope with them on their journey. He condemned as "vile" the attack on Syrian refugees in Aleppo on Saturday in which 126 people died, nearly 70 of them children, when a suicide car bomber targeted buses being used to evacuate four besieged towns. Holy Week celebra-

tions had earlier been marred by two attacks by Islamists on Coptic churches in Egypt that killed more than 45 people.

Security was tight around St Peter's Square yesterday, with armed police on rooftops. The Pope, pointing to thousands of flowers imported from the Netherlands to decorate the basilica steps, said that Easter was far more than "a party with lots of flowers". It was "a sign in the midst of so many calamities,

a sense of looking beyond, of saying don't look to a wall, there's a horizon, there is life, there is joy".

The Pope prayed that God might grant peace to the entire Middle East, and for the peoples of South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo, "who endure continuing hostilities, aggravated by the grave famine".

Syria bus attack, page 29
Rebels challenge Pope, page 31

Don't let terror and poverty win, says Welby

Neil Johnstone

The Archbishop of Canterbury has used his Easter Day sermon to urge Christians not to let the evils of terrorism, pain and poverty triumph and to put their faith in "restoration and hope".

Justin Welby referred to bombings in the Middle East and told worshippers that in the face of "pain and despair, grief and death" people should remember the words: "Do not be afraid." Although many were still suffering from ill health and deprivation, people must not allow "grim, grey moments" to overshadow their daily lives.

"Everything we are and own and see is to be lived, and held and understood through the resurrection," the Archbishop said. "But be under no illusion, this is utterly counter to how the world runs itself, and so we live in the now of a world in which the resurrection has happened, and the not yet of a world where there is still evil."

In his reading at Canterbury Cathedral, he spoke of deadly terrorist attacks in Egypt on Palm Sunday that killed more than 40 people in churches in Al-Exandria and Tanta.

The archbishop added that in a world dominated by opinions where facts were questioned, truth could still prevail. "We are used to facts being contested," he said. "We are even used to facts being reduced to the level of opinion. So individualised are our news cycles that our opinions are in themselves the only facts that seem to count."

In Windsor, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge joined the Queen for an Easter service at St George's Chapel.

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